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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000586

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SUBJECT: ARMENIAN ELECTIONS: VIEWS FROM ARAGOTSOTN

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Classified By: GSO Trevor Boyd, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. Characterizing the pre-election campaigning as "boring," governmental, non-governmental, political party and international observers in the Aragotsotn region of Armenia foresee a parliamentary election devoid of significant fraud in their area. Interlocutors tell us that there was a clear message from the President's office in Yerevan to conduct clean elections. With the district already a stronghold of support for the ruling Republican Party, no one, it seems, appears to want to risk provoking ire from Yerevan with Election Day tomfoolery. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Though only thirty minutes from Yerevan, the Aragotsotn region is among the most rural of Armenia's eleven regions. The region, constituting nearly ten percent of nation's territory, is home to less than five percent of its population. Once a center of science in Soviet Armenia, Aragotsotn is now known for its agriculture production and animal husbandry.

¶3. (C) Two Emboffs visited the region on April 30 and conducted meetings in the regional capital of Ashtarak with Siraznik Hovsepyan, regional coordinator of the NGO "Its Your Choice," Gabriel Gyozalyan, Governor and regional Dashnak Party Chairman, Manas Arakelyan, Regional Board Member of the Prosperous Armenia Party, Sargis Sahakyan, Deputy Governor and Chairman of the Ashtarak branch of the Republic Party, and Tayo Oke and Trudy Hughes, OSCE long-term observers.

MARVELOUSLY DULL 'ROUND HERE

¶4. (C) Characterizing the campaigning as "boring," Canada's Trudy Hughes and Britain's Tayo Oke, OSCE long-term observers in Ashtarak, told us that they've heard of no significant violations since their March 22 arrival. The region, they said, is firmly Republican Party territory and, with the region's electoral support "sewn up," there should be few instances of "unnecessary" fraud on election day.

¶5. (C) Siraznik Hovsepyan, regional coordinator of the NGO "Its Your Choice" concurred, noting that his watchdog organization has received "no alarming" calls regarding electoral hijinks. What calls they have received, he said, were aesthetic-related complaints from private citizens regarding the placement of campaign material on buildings.

EQUAL ACCESS TO THE PEOPLE

¶6. (C) Given its proximity to Yerevan, Ashtarak has hosted visits from the leadership of all of major political parties. Regional Governor Gabriel Gyozalyan told us that his office has coordinated closely with the Mayoralty to ensure that every political party and individual candidate has received permission to campaign in the region, including holding rallies in the central square.

NO REPORTS OF ATTEMPTS AT VOTE BUYING

¶7. (C) A Peace Corps volunteer told us that the citizens in his village are actually disappointed that no one has tried to buy their votes. In previous elections, parties plied voters with flour, oil, and other basic necessities. Villagers, he said, have come to rely upon these incentives each electoral cycle, and are angry that they are not getting the goods this time.

THE PRESIDENT WILL HOLD US PERSONALLY LIABLE FOR FRAUD

¶8. (C) All interlocutors note that President Kocharian's office has been heavily involved in promoting a "No Fraud" election. Gyozalyan noted that he and the two Chairmen of Aragotsotn' Territorial Election Committees were "summoned" on short notice to Yerevan on a Sunday to have a private meeting with the President's Deputy Chief of Staff. At this meeting, he said, they were told that the regional leadership, who are appointed by the President, would be held "personally liable" should there be any fraud from their region. Fraud, he said he was told, was to be minimized. Gyozalyan noted that the anti-fraud focus was a result of the President's office fearing the loss of Millennium Challenge, Lincy Foundation and World Bank monies. He was going to pass this message, he said, to the regions precinct election

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commissions.

VOTER ROLLS LARGEST POTENTIAL SOURCE OF FRAUD

¶9. (C) Interlocutors highlighted concerns with the list of eligible voters as the most likely place for fraud to occur. Like most of Armenia, upwards of twenty percent of Aragotsotn's registered voters work abroad, most in Russia. Armenian legislative changes preclude absentee or Embassy-based voting. With less than ten percent of the Aragotsotn citizenry formally affiliated with a party, the pool of the potential supporters is immense. All interlocutors noted that they are working with the Police's OVIR division to update the voter rolls.

SO WE WILL STILL SEND OBSERVERS

¶10. (C) Political party and non-governmental observers will swamp polling places on election day. Hovsepyan said that "Its Your Choice" will send two observers to each of the region's 163 precincts. Gyozalyan, Arakelyan, and Sahakyan noted that they will each deploy similar numbers of partisan observers who should further deter chicanery on May 12.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) OSCE reports from recent elections, which have been critical of Armenia's electoral performance, have never singled out Aragotsotn as a place of concern. Given its tradition as a stronghold of Republican Party support, fraud appears unlikely. Actually running a clean poll may be the

path of least resistance in Aragotsotn. END COMMENT.
GODFREY